

Sermon

June 1, 2014

Easter VII

Jesus has gone away. He is no longer here. That is the essence of what the disciples have just heard from angels as Jesus ascended into the sky. The one person they had relied on during his earthly life-- and for the forty days since his resurrection-- he is gone. And though Jesus has left them with promise about the Spirit coming to be with them soon, the fact remains that now they are alone together.

The thing is this pattern of Jesus going away is not new for them. Jesus had a habit of leaving them during his time of public ministry. We're told that he would get up early and go off to pray. Sometimes he would be gone overnight, praying about something important, like which of his disciples he should call to be partners in his ministry. One time when he had gone away early one morning, the disciples panicked and tracked him down. They were afraid he was leaving them alone to deal with the large crowds that followed after him.

Of course the biggest "going away" was when Jesus was arrested, tortured, crucified, and buried. Their rabbi was ripped away from them and treated like a common criminal. Those horrible events were about more than Jesus going away—the disciples had also abandoned him in his time of need. But regardless of their failures, they still felt abandoned by Jesus as he was laid in the tomb. They were alone.

Jesus' resurrection changed that. Jesus returned from the grave and appeared to them individually and in small and large groups. He gave them peace about life and a new perspective about their ministry. They didn't need to be just like him. They could rely on his grace to help them be who they are called to be. And that is really all that any of us need to be effective ministers of the gospel.

But today on this Seventh Sunday of Easter we hear the story of Jesus' Ascension-- that Jesus has gone away. What would the disciples do? In the passage from Acts, Jesus gave them three instructions: First, don't try to figure out the future. Wait for the Spirit. Be my witnesses. That was Jesus' final plan as he left this earth.

I have to admit I would have felt a bit anxious if I was in Jesus shoes, so to speak, as he left Earth. Would this crew who had missed the point and let him down so many times really get it? Would they step up and do the work that God had called them to do and that Jesus had exemplified for them for three years? Based on past performance, I would not have predicted much future success. But Jesus was gone—they would have to do.

We have the benefit of knowing the rest of the story. The apostles stepped up and even more amazingly others stepped up—people who had never known Jesus on Earth. Because something amazing happened. The remnants of Jesus’ family and followers were only a group of a hundred or so. No one would have predicted they would have existed for another twenty years much less for twenty centuries; and grow to over one billion members today. And it all began with Jesus leaving them alone.

These few-- Peter, James, John and the other disciples named in Acts, and certain women including Jesus’ mother Mary, and his brothers and some others-- were the beginning. Jesus was gone and they weren’t sure what to do next. Jesus had told them to wait—so they did. And while they waited, alone together, we’re told that they “were constantly devoting themselves to prayer.” That was their response, in that time and place, to Jesus going away. And then days later—as we will hear about next Sunday—their waiting was rewarded with the coming of the Holy Spirit. And the world was changed forever.

So that was then. Today some of us have times when we may feel Jesus has “gone away.” It is different for us than for those disciples back then. We never knew Jesus in the flesh. We have not experienced his pattern of leaving during his earthly life and ministry. We weren’t there at his arrest or his ascension. But sometimes, we still get the feeling that he has gone away.

You know, when your life is not working out the way you planned it. Or something bad happens to someone you love. Or the religious practices that have always worked for you in the past suddenly ring hollow. It is natural for many of us in those times to wonder—what has gone wrong? Have I lost God’s blessing? Has Jesus gone away from my life? Will he ever come back?

If we ever feel that way, we are in good company. Not only with the apostles in the Book of Acts. But with saints who have lived through the centuries. One saint’s story you may have heard me mention before is that of Mother Theresa of Calcutta. A book came out a few years ago that contained some of her letters and journal entries. As a young woman, she had mystical experiences that were part of her inspiration to take on religious life and do her extraordinary works of service through her religious community. But those early experiences were followed by years and years of spiritual dryness. In a sense, Jesus had “gone away” from her, too.

Her response was to stay faithful, to stay in community and pray, and to seek Jesus where he had promised to be found—in the people she served who were so ill and too often dying on the streets of Calcutta. This was not “feel good,” mountain top, and TV evangelist religion. It was doing hard work by God’s grace and accompanied with others who were also willing to pray and to serve.

So what do we do when we feel Jesus has “gone away” in our lives? There are many options. We can withdraw. We can seek to distract ourselves—there are so many distractions available in our world. There are so many that we get distracted even when we don’t want to be! We can make rationalizations—make excuses for the absence we feel. Maybe there’s something wrong with us; or maybe there was something wrong with our old time religion. We can tell ourselves that we have grown up and grown beyond that religious stuff of our youth. Or we can become even more religious, joining the latest trend and anxiously trying to find what we have lost.

So many options; so when you feel Jesus has gone away, what do you do?

This morning, I’d like to offer you another way—whether you feel like what I am describing right now; or to keep in mind if you ever do some day. First, let us remember Jesus’ words to his disciples: Don’t try to figure out the future. Wait. Be witnesses. Then take those directions from Jesus and apply them like the first Christian community did—men and women, family, friends, and strangers, constantly devoting ourselves to prayer.

We will have a chance to pray like that next Saturday night into Sunday morning. I have called for a Vigil of Pentecost in our church. It will be like an Easter Vigil service. But after the proper service is completed, we will have an all night prayer vigil here at the church. Parishioners have received a modern way to sign up for this vigil—an email with a “Sign-up Genius” app. If you haven’t already, you can sign up in thirty minute shift at any time through the night (people who sign-up between 2:00 and 4:00 am will get a special dispensation).

And when we gather, we will pray for three things in particular:

First, we will pray for people who are ill, seriously ill. Some may be able to come and receive prayer in person. Some may be far away. But we will pray for them, especially remembering those who might wonder if Jesus has gone away.

Then we will pray for this church and especially our future. Your vestry and I and others believe it is time to expand our building so we can continue to expand our mission here in Forsyth County. We are working to be faithful in how we do that, but we know we don’t have all the answers. We believe it is God who will provide for us in ways we don’t even know yet.

And third we will pray for the church in this diocese and around the world. Frankly, there are reports about the church and its decline that make us wonder if Jesus has gone away again. But like we heard in the Book of acts, his leaving is not the end of the story. Jesus has gone away—but we are not alone. He has given us the Spirit and one another so that we may be his presence for others; and so that we may find his presence in others as we do the work he has left us to do. Amen.